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ABSTRACT

Three groups of persons are involved in the testing enterprise: test producers, test users, and test takers. A wide literature is available to guide the first two groups, but only recently have measurement professionals considered the interests of test takers in any careful way. The content of this chapter is presented as a set of 26 recommendations. These are intended as positive statements or guidelines for test users to consider as they develop, administer, score, and interpret assessments. The 26 guidelines are grouped according to the four assessment functions: development, administration, scoring, and interpretation. (GCP)

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Informing Test Takers

By
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Chapter 5
Informing Test Takers

William D. Schafer

Three groups of persons are involved in the testing enterprise: test producers, test users, and test takers. A wide literature is available to guide the first two groups, but only recently have measurement professionals considered the interests of test takers in any careful way. Yet there is a real advantage in a conscientious attempt to meet the information needs of test takers. Examinees who understand the nature of an upcoming assessment are likely to be more motivated to do well on it, be able to prepare themselves better, and make better use of the test results than examinees who are confronted with an ill-defined event. Moreover, if the mechanical details of preparing for and completing an assessment are explained to test takers, there will probably be less error in their scores caused by factors other than the construct being assessed, which enhances the reliability and validity of the assessment. Finally, informing test takers is simply the responsible thing to do.

This chapter will draw material from four statements from professional groups that are relevant to our topic:

Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (3rd ed.). A joint statement of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) issued in 1999, these standards are recognized as the most authoritative source of psychometric best practice. A committee of accomplished association representatives developed each edition, and their work has been the result of much deliberation and public review. If any other source or set of guidelines conflicts with it, these standards should take precedence. (For more information on the application of these standards to educatonal testing, see chapter 35.)

Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education. The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* was developed by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices (JCTP, 2002). A distillation of key concepts from the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, the Code of Fair Testing*

Practices offers less technical guidance to test users and policymakers. The current version is a revision of the original code developed by the same group in 1988. The statement has been endorsed by virtually all major test publishers.

Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities* was developed in 1995 by the NCME, a body of educational practitioners working in the schools. Several of the statements in this guide to professionally responsible practice are directly relevant to informing test takers.

Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers: Guidelines and Expectations. The final source is another statement of the JCTP (2000). The first description that applies broadly and directly to test takers, it has been endorsed by several measurement-related organizations.

Organization of This Chapter

There are phases of test development and use: development, administration, scoring, and interpretation. This chapter is divided into sections corresponding to these phases. Individuals involved in all four phases—both producers and users of tests—share the responsibility to inform test takers; no assessment professional should assume someone else will attend to any of this important task without satisfying himself or herself that it will be done. To do otherwise would contradict the clear statements of several respected organizations of measurement professionals and thus would constitute irresponsible practice.

This volume is intended for educational practitioners. Because classroom assessments developed by their teachers constitute the great majority of testing in education, these sorts of tests will be emphasized. Yet other sorts of tests are also important, including standardized tests. More effort is expended in their development, and they are typically less prone to misuse. When misuse does occur, however, it is commonly the result of poorly trained administrators or poorly informed test takers.

Finally, a clear purpose of informing test takers is to make sure the assessment is fair and is used fairly. Some of the statements in the sources used here are directly aimed at ensuring fairness through informing test takers. Other statements of the testing profession also address enhancing fairness but are only tangentially related to information flow. Nevertheless, those statements are included here because only when a test is fair can it be presented as such to test takers,

who certainly have a fundamental expectation that they are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by irrelevant assessment characteristics, an excellent definition of fairness.

The content of this chapter is presented as a set of 26 recommendations. These are intended as positive statements or guidelines for test users to consider as they develop, administer, score, and interpret assessments. The 26 guidelines will be grouped according the four assessment functions: development, administration, scoring, and interpretation. These are fairly well-defined activities, and it is usually clear which role a professional is engaged in at any given time. This should help a reader focus on the appropriate material so as to make use of the chapter to enhance fairness in his or her future assessment efforts.

Development of Assessments

The *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* asks test producers to define what each test measures and what purposes it should be used for. They are also asked to describe the process of test development and to explain how the content and skills to be tested were selected. Certain steps in writing an assessment enable that to happen:

1. Base assessments on a clearly defined domain. Examinees expect a test to conform to what they understand it should cover. For example, an achievement test should cover a certain domain of knowledge and skills. Students should expect a test that does not mislead them into giving wrong answers nor reward them with an artificially high score for guessing or bluffing, because these skills are not part of the domain of the assessment. Finally, a test that is face valid looks to examinees like it measures when they think it should, which enhances their motivation to succeed.
2. Cover the full range of psychological components, such as thinking skills and processes for cognitive tests. Assuming you have included higher-order thinking skills in your instruction, your assessments should prompt students to use the material intellectually, not merely echo memorized material. If tests cover only memorization, the students will merely memorize facts in their test

preparation.

3. Test content that is important for students to know or be able to do as opposed to isolated trivia. Ask yourself what students need to come away with from the course. Tests should focus on what educators who teach that course would agree is important.
4. Cover content in proportion to its coverage in instruction. The test should be representative of what students are supposed to be studying. The best guide for both teacher and student to the appropriate proportions of content is the relative amounts of time spent on those topics during instruction.
5. Make sure all contexts and expressions are equally familiar and interesting to all students. A challenge in developing assessments is to make sure no student is advantaged or disadvantaged because of his or her background. Avoid topics or language that are better known or more intriguing to some students than to others. For example, an item that asks students to plot points on a grid in the context of the job of an air-traffic controller would probably be more easily understood by affluent students who live near cities than by economically disadvantaged students in rural settings. Traditional gender interests (e.g., child rearing, sports) are better avoided too. If creating neutral contexts is impossible, then at least try to make sure the questions that favor some students are balanced with other questions that favor the rest.
6. Avoid topics that are sensitive and may elicit emotional reactions in some students, possibly interfering with their best test performance. For example, an item dealing with death may be difficult to respond to for a student who has experienced a recent death in the family. Similarly, items that are based on stereotypes of minority groups or that assume certain positions on controversial topics—like religion, gun control, or abortion—can cause reactions in students that make it difficult for them to show what they can do. Unless course objectives relate to such topics, including them on an assessment may result in invalidity due to discrimination against these students.

Administration of Assessments

Assessment administration has two phases: before the assessment and during the assessment. In each case, fairness requires that certain information be shared with all examinees.

Before the Assessment

7. Provide examinees with a statement of test-takers' rights and responsibilities well in advance of the test. According to the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers,* all examinees have a right to be informed of their rights and responsibilities as test takers. The *Rights and Responsibilities* document is a clear and concise statement designed for all examinees. It should be a routine handout whenever assessments are administered under the guidelines of an institution such as a school. A copy of this document is found on the supplementary compact disc that accompanies this book.
8. Ensure that all students have had equivalent and adequate opportunities to prepare for the assessment. Whether or not each student has learned as much as he or she can, at least each should have an equal chance to do so. If a student is given extra practice time or materials that are not given to others, the others likely will not feel that they have been treated fairly. With respect to professional statements, this principle can be related to a decision about whether or not to take an assessment. The *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* states that an examinee has a right to know if a test is optional and to know the consequences of taking or not taking the test, fully completing the test, or canceling the scores. The examinee may need to ask questions to learn these consequences. Similarly, a statement in the *Code of Fair Testing Practices* indicates that when a test is optional, the test user should provide test takers or their parents or guardians with sufficient information to help them make a judgment about whether the student should take the test or an available alternative assessment. Although these statements do not speak directly to opportunity to learn, they indicate the importance of providing examinees with

the information they need to decide on their own whether an assessment is appropriate for them. Clearly, that decision will be affected by whether students have been or should have been adequately prepared.

9. Announce assessments in plenty of time for students to prepare for them. There are three fundamental reasons for this. First, students need to know what will be covered and how they will be asked to show their achievement in order to make decisions about how to prepare themselves. Second, students need to know when and where to appear for the assessment and what to bring with them. This requires their being informed about the logistics of the assessment. Finally, an unannounced assessment is a surprise assessment. Students' learning styles differ: Some will stay up to date with the information whereas others will put in extra effort when they need it most. A surprise assessment rewards the former and punishes the latter. Yet these learning styles are not part of the material to be learned. Thus, it is fairer to announce assessments in advance, in order to motivate students to study.

Numerous statements in the professional positions cited here support the need for advance preparation for testing. For example, according to the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers,* students are responsible for knowing, in advance of testing, when the test will be given, if and when the results will be available to them, and whether they are expected to pay any fees for testing services.

The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* contains a statement intended to enable students to satisfy this responsibility; the statement indicates the test user should inform examinees about the assessment prior to its administration, including the purposes, uses, and consequences of the assessment; how it will be judged or scored; how results will be kept on file; who will have access to results; how results will be distributed; and what rights examinees have before, during, and after the assessment. Further, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities* indicates test users should (a) provide appropriate opportunities for individuals to ask questions about assessment procedures or directions before administration, (b) inform persons involved in the assessment process how test results may affect them, (c) disclose whether and how long the results will be kept on file, (d) outline the procedures for appeal and rescoring, and (e) state the

rights examinees and others have to the test information, and how long these rights may be exercised.

According to the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers,* examinees have a right to receive a brief explanation prior to testing about the purpose or purposes for the assessment, the kinds of tests that will be used, whether and to whom the results will be reported, and planned uses of the results. Individual examinees also have the right to present any concerns about the testing process or their results and to receive information about procedures that will be used to address their concerns.

If a student has a disability, the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* specifies that he or she has the right to ask about and receive information regarding testing accommodations. If the student has difficulty in understanding the language of the test, he or she has the right to learn in advance of testing whether language accommodations are available. Thus, students who may be challenged by their status as learners of the language of the test or by physical limitations such as blindness may learn about available accommodations such as bilingual dictionaries or brailled versions of the test.

According to the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers,* with these rights come certain responsibilities. It is the examinee's responsibility to know what his or her rights and responsibilities are. The examinee also has the responsibility to read or listen to the descriptive information provided in advance of testing and to listen carefully to all test instructions. He or she should inform an examiner prior to testing if an assessment accommodation is desired or if a physical condition or illness exists that might interfere with best performance on the assessment. If an examinee has difficulty understanding the language of the test, it is his or her responsibility to inform an examiner of this.

Finally, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* specifies that test producers must communicate to potential users, before any purchase or use, of all the applicable fees associated with the assessment products and services. Similarly, the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* specifies that examinees have the responsibility to know when and where the assessment will be given, to pay for the test if required, to appear on time with required materials, and to be ready to be tested.

10. Make sure examinees are familiar with the response formats on the assessment. If some students are

uncomfortable with the types of items on an assessment, they will not have a fair chance to show their achievement. In such a case, practice with the formats beforehand would likely help them succeed. According to the *Code of Fair Testing Practices*, test producers should provide to qualified users either representative samples or complete sets of test directions, questions, answer sheets, manuals, and score reports. The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* goes on to state that test users should provide test takers with the information they need to familiarize themselves with the question formats, the directions, and appropriate strategies for test taking. Further, test users should strive to make this information equally available to all test takers. Accordingly, examinees have the responsibility, according to the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers*, to ask questions before testing if they have uncertainties about why the assessment is being used, how it is to be given, what they are to be asked to do, and what is to be done with the results.

During the Assessment

11. Administer the assessment exactly as specified in the manual, if there is one. Test administration must conform to standard conditions if scores from different administration sessions, including those from the norm group, are to be compared. Accordingly, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* specifies that users should administer standardized assessments exactly according to the prescribed procedures and conditions. Further, they should notify appropriate persons should any nonstandard conditions occur during testing. As all standardized administration procedures allow, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities* specifies that users should provide examinees with appropriate opportunities to ask questions about the test procedures or directions at identified times during the administration of the test. Should variations to standardized conditions exist, however, the *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* assigns to test takers the responsibility to inform appropriate persons, specified by

the agency responsible for testing, if they believe that these unusual testing conditions may have affected their performance.

12. Administer allowable accommodations as specified. Appropriate accommodations for standardized tests should be identified in the manual. For nonstandardized tests, provide administration accommodations when specified for an individual student according to school and district procedures. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* states that test users should provide and document all reasonable, allowable accommodations when administering a test to people with disabilities or special needs.
13. If the test is nonstandardized, then allow students enough time to complete it. Most tests in education will not assess content that is to be used under time pressure or in a rushed manner. Therefore, most assessments should reward quality over speed. Only by allowing sufficient time that virtually all students have the opportunity to answer all questions will the effects of speed of response be eliminated as a barrier to student performance.

Scoring of Assessments

14. Score each student's responses in isolation, without considering other information about the student. Assign a score to a student's answer based strictly on what the student has done on the assessment, not on other factors. Were other information (e.g., how the student interacts in class discussions) to affect the score, all students would not have an equal chance to do well on the assessment and therefore the results of the scoring would not be fair.
15. Score using a rubric that awards full credit to a response that answers the question, as opposed to demanding more information than asked for to receive full credit. If the question does not prompt an answer that receives full credit, then change the question. It is unfair to give students higher scores for doing more than has been requested; not all of the students will realize that there are different (and hidden) directions besides the ones they

have been told to use.

16. Score using a rubric that does not reward expressions more typical of one group of students than another. High scores should be available to all students, regardless of background, unless they do not possess high levels of the skill or knowledge being measured. This principle is commonly violated on items that ask students to take and defend a position on some issue. The teacher may have a belief about which position is more tenable and thus reward students who choose it by more readily agreeing with their arguments. The highest score should not depend on which position the student takes.
17. Honor all commitments and return assessments in a timely manner. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* specifies that those who score tests should provide complete and accurate information to test users about how the assessment will be scored, including the schedule, scoring process, rationale for the approach to scoring, technical characteristics, procedures for quality control, reporting formats, and fees, if any, for their services. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities* further specifies that scorers should inform users promptly if there is any deviation in the planned scoring and reporting schedule or service and negotiate with users to reach a solution.
18. Allow test takers a reasonable way to challenge how their work was scored. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* states that scorers should establish, if feasible, a reasonable and fair process for appeal and possible rescoring of the assessment.

Interpretation of Assessments

In order to be fair, tests must be used and interpreted accurately. Further, they must be used with an eye to their limitations. Several recommendations in the professional statements revolve around these themes. In addition, I provide some particular recommendations for teachers who use test scores as bases for grading students.

19. Explain to those who receive test information the advantages and limitations of tests in clear and accurate

terms. Especially for naïve users, tests seem to yield more accurate data then they actually can. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* notes that users should provide to those who receive assessment results details about the assessment, its purposes, its limitations, and what is necessary for proper interpretation of the results. Regarding individual score reports, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities* goes on to recommend that recipients receive a report containing an understandable, written description of any reported scores, including proper interpretations and likely misinterpretations.

The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* asks test users to avoid misuses of test results. For example, providing impoverished educational opportunities for students who score low on an intelligence test would constitute a misuse of the test but is nevertheless a not unlikely result. Similarly, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities* recommends that test users interpret, use, and communicate scores in an informed, objective, and fair manner, in the context of the test's limitations and in the light of the potential consequences of use.

20. Accurately represent the nature of norms. When norms are a factor in interpretation, the adequacy of the norms should become part of the interpretation of test scores. Thus, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities* recommends that users evaluate and explain the adequacy and appropriateness of any norms or standards that are used in interpreting assessment results. Similarly, the *Code of Fair Testing Practices* asks users to take into account whatever major differences may exist between the norm groups and the actual test takers, and any differences in test administration, as they interpret scores. The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* goes on to recommend interpreting results carefully if modifications have been made for individuals with disabilities.
21. Communicate scores to appropriate audiences in an accurate and timely way, taking into account the limitations of the scores. There are three components to this recommendation. First, information about how individual examinees scored on a test should be released

only to appropriate persons, usually the test taker if age appropriate, the parents or guardians, and institutional representatives. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities* states that test users should release results of the assessment only to those persons entitled to them by law (i.e., the examinee or his or her parent or guardian) or to those designated by the agency contracting for the testing services.

The second issue is that test information should be released in understandable and timely reports. The *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* indicates that examinees have a right to receive an explanation of their test results within a reasonable time period after testing and in terms that are commonly understood. The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* indicates that test takers should be provided with easily understood and timely score reports that describe test performance accurately and clearly. Test takers should also receive an explanation of the meaning and limitations of reported scores. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities* indicates that test users should communicate the results of the assessment to appropriate audiences in a timely and understandable manner; the communication should include proper interpretations as well as likely misinterpretations.

The third issue is that test users have a responsibility to ensure that others use test results in responsible ways. Thus, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* indicates that users should avoid providing reports that are inaccurate, claims that are unsubstantiated, or interpretations that are inappropriate, false, or misleading about assessment results, and should also actively discourage others from doing so. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities* asks users to develop test score reports and other support materials that promote understanding of test results, and to correct substantive inaccuracies in assessments or supporting materials as soon as is feasible.

22. Allow test takers (or their representatives) reasonable opportunities to challenge or otherwise correct their results. The *Code of Fair Testing Practices* asks users to provide test takers or their parents or guardians with information about any rights they have to obtain a copy of the test and answer sheets, to retake the test, to have the test rescored, or to cancel the scores. The *Code of*

Fair Testing Practices also specifies that users should describe how test takers or their parents or guardians may register complaints and have problems resolved, should explain to test takers or their parents or guardians how long the scores will be kept on file, and should specify when and to whom test scores will and will not be released. Finally, the *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* asks users to provide corrected assessment results to the examinee as quickly as practicable if errors are found that could affect inferences drawn from the scores.

Because assigning grades is a common use of test scores in schools, several recommendations are oriented toward how tests should be represented in teachers' grading.

23. Base grades on end-of-unit (summative) assessments rather than formative assessment used to make decisions about learning in progress. The latter are diagnostic and are intended to help teachers and students accomplish learning. Because grades are supposed to certify attainment, they should be based on assessments administered after learning has taken place.
24. Base grades on a variety of assessment formats. Students are likely to have different preferred assessment formats. Some students may be advantaged by essay tests, others by selected-response tests, still others by performance assessments, and others by papers and projects. Basing grades on a variety of formats minimizes the chance that some students receive an unfair advantage.
25. Base grades on multiple assessments over time. As with test formats, grades should depend on several assessments taken at different times. The *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* states that whenever possible those who interpret assessments should use multiple types and sources of information about persons in making educational decisions. Ideally, grades should be based on multiple types of information gathered throughout a marking period instead of information from one single test at the end.
26. If factors existed that may have made a student's

performance atypical on an assessment, the importance of the student's score on that assessment should be minimized in grading. If a student has not had the chance to do his or her best, then basing a grade (or other important decision) on that score is not only inaccurate, it is unfair. It misinforms anyone who interprets it.

Conclusion

Educational professions have a great deal of control over the assessments they use. It is rare that anyone questions how a teacher tests students or what a counselor infers and communicates about a student from his or her responses on a test. Nevertheless, developing and using tests fairly, with an open and honest sharing of relevant information between the test user and the test taker, is an ideal toward which we all should strive. Not only is it simply the ethical thing to do, it promotes more effective use of better information from assessments. I hope that this chapter can promote that goal by presenting positive recommendations within an efficient organization.

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✦ Document is included in the Anthology of Assessment Resources CD

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